

The background of the cover is a solid red color. Overlaid on this is a black silhouette of a world map, showing the outlines of continents and major islands. The map is centered and occupies most of the space.

Tests of Global Governance

**Canadian Diplomacy
and United Nations
World Conferences**

ANDREW F. COOPER

Tests of global governance:
Canadian diplomacy and
United Nations world conferences

Andrew F. Cooper



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United Nations world conferences as tests of global governance: an overview

The series of world conferences sponsored by the United Nations (UN) over the past decade form the context for an extended debate about the relationship between global governance and diplomacy and the role of the state and societal forces in the post-Cold War era. These conferences shifted the focus of UN attention away from attempts to accommodate globalisation through integrated economic interaction towards the promotion (if far from complete acceptance) of universal social values and a demand for transparency and greater inclusion in international power structures and decision-making processes. The extent to which this alternative agenda was novel in form, intense in application, or far-reaching in scope remains moot. What stands out, however, as a point of entry for this book is the question of the degree of latitude – or set of permissive conditions – that has become available for the institution and the machinery of this type of reform to make a difference in the international arena.

UN-sponsored conferences as test sites of change in international relations cannot be separated from the overall fortunes of the UN. Building on the momentum of what has been termed the “return to the UN” (Berridge, 1991; Weiss, Forsythe and Coate, 1994), the world conferences rose to the top of the intellectual and policy agenda at a time of transition. Once released from the older constraints of bipolarity and East/West rivalry, the UN gained recognition as an essential ingredient in the building of an authentic new world order based on collective action with

a commitment both to inspire and to solve problems on a planetary level (the literature on the debate about this order has become vast; see, for example, Clark, 2001a; Hall, 1996; Williams, 1998). The UN benefited from the willingness of at least some actors in the international system to think beyond the narrow parameters imposed by the structure of the Cold War. In keeping with the development of “an ethos of its own” (Roberts and Kingsbury, 1994: 24), the UN concomitantly gained stature as a promoter and populariser of progressive remedies for a variety of the world’s ills.

Despite these enhanced credentials, the limitations on such an ultra-ambitious range of goals must also be acknowledged. The UN’s moment of opportunity – and certainly, any taste of triumphalism – did not last long. Any hope of a widely shared agreement concerning the legitimacy or the capacity of the UN to champion an ambitious cluster of reform-oriented initiatives eroded with attempts to move forward either on a basis of a cluster of principled ideas or with a changed architecture. Many of the traditional flaws of the UN, instead of being corrected, persisted and were even exacerbated under the weight of its new responsibilities. The leadership made available by the UN for the world conferences had an uneven quality. Sometimes it was innovative and even inspiring; at other times it was muted or proffered in an extremely cautious manner. The UN could only be as robust an institution as its member states allowed it to be. Even the loose consensus among members who were willing to state that the UN should embrace some tenets of change through the medium of the world conferences broke down with respect to administrative functions and the allocation of material resources and expertise. The management of the world conference remained an unwieldy and highly differentiated enterprise.

Disputed perspectives on UN world conferences

Given these impediments, it is not surprising that UN conferences have fallen far short of the claims – either negative or positive – often attributed to them. Their characterisation through a range of critical lenses gives very different emphases, and draws widely diverse conclusions. A populist neo-liberal line of argument condemns the UN conferences for their excessive reach, seeing them as part of a plan (or even a conspiracy) by a narrow élite to impose a radically altered way of doing things in the international arena. In its most extreme form, this attack conjures up an image of “world government”. More commonly, the conferences are stigmatised not only for being a waste of money but for providing another channel and excuse for regulation (see, for example, Rabkin,

1998).¹ From the point of view of the Anglo-American realist school, during the time between the end of the Cold War and the Durban Conference on Racism immediately preceding the events of 11 September 2001 the UN conferences are seen as an irrelevant form of diplomatic activity. In this view, what is needed to maintain an efficient international order (and national interest) has been sacrificed to an ideal of what should be, or is, right. Compared to the “real business” of diplomacy, through bilateral dialogue and bargaining, therefore, realists say, this strand of multilateralism (akin to its many predecessors) should be dismissed as “a babel of voices, a confusion of tongues” that serves “no very useful purpose” (Watson, 1982: 151).² Or, as Alan James has put it with respect to a different time and context, these conferences have become “little more than contemporary froth” in world politics (James, 1980: 932).

Alternatively, for the proponents of global transformation the world conferences are often damned with faint praise. Although they are seen to be moving in the right direction, as tests of global governance they are graded as “could do better” because they do not go far enough in embracing a genuine form of bottom-up multilateralism. The conferences may help nudge the process along the correct path of change, but they do not represent the goal. Indeed, they may even delay this goal by introducing alternative means of closure and control in a top-down fashion (representative samples from this school include work by Lipschutz, 1992 and Palan, 1999).

Critics have made little attempt to trace the trajectory of the UN world conferences in terms of their original motives and the way they were reconfigured or refined when confronted either by opportunities or by obstacles. All of these lines of criticism, therefore, miss out on the rich detail that makes these conferences such a valuable laboratory for the study of international politics during the interregnum decade after the Cold War. While long in conjecture about the conferences constituting an attempt on the part of a UN-centred cohort to impose a formula of top-down “global government”, the neo-liberal view is quite divorced from the reality (with all the nuance of negotiated compromise) of what took place on the ground. Lacking interest in questions about ideas, values, and identity, realists have for the most part simply ignored the phenomenon.

World society advocates across the spectrum set an extremely high and demanding bar for these forums. From their perspectives, the only standard by which to judge the impact of the UN conferences must be their ability to animate a normative revolution in global governance, that is to say, to motivate a leap ahead towards the emergence of a cosmopolitan citizenship and an ethos of transparency and accountability. They con-

trast this anticipated mode of “humane” governance, embedded in democratic civil society with the “inhumane” governance of market forces, corporate power, and state coercion (see, for example, Falk, 1995; Falk, Kim and Mendlovitz, 1991). By these criteria, the UN conferences are at best a very incomplete accomplishment. As Richard Falk has made the point:

The UN conferences on global issues held during the first half of the 1990s illustrated [a] new political energy as focused on environment, women, human rights, and development. But what was lacking was a cross-issue orientation that would be necessary to sustain coherent politics from below that could in some ways balance the coherence of neo-liberalism in its different, but mutually reinforcing, forms. (Falk, 2000: 379)

The argument of this book is that the UN world conferences did both less and more than their critics suggest. Far from raising the spectre of “world government”, their institutional format is not taken to represent a dramatic break with the intergovernmental model of the conduct of international relations. States still remain the principal agents within the UN-centred process of communication and negotiation. Yet, contrary to the view that the UN conferences amount to theatre and little else, the contention in this book is that they have acted as a vehicle for bending the rules in terms of where, how, and with whom the pattern of diplomatic interaction is played out.

Equally, notwithstanding the disappointment of world society advocates about their level of delivery, the UN conferences have advanced an agenda based on more open forms of representation and discourse. Although not yet at the cusp of a new structure of global governance, these events nevertheless operate along the front lines of the intellectual debate and adaptive delivery processes that are compatible with this goal.

Furthermore, the argument is made that these manifestations of global change go well beyond mere machinery. To be taken seriously in any test of impact, global governance must contain a substantive core of concern for the betterment of the human condition. However, the significance of the way this element emerged through the mechanism of UN world conferences should not be exaggerated. In declaratory terms, there was no single blueprint for a progressive strategy. The Commission on Global Governance in *Our Global Neighbourhood* exhorted the world to respond to the demands of global change by offering “freshness and innovation in global governance” (Commission on Global Governance, 1995: XVI). Nevertheless, the design for change remained the sum of all the parts encompassing the entire life of these UN conferences.

In operational terms, the repertoire for implementation remained

highly truncated. Commitments made by states often proved empty or at most shallow, particularly regarding efforts to redistribute costs and resources. The UN conferences were able to produce some advances in the context of rules, norms, and institutional development. However, they were less successful in turning resolutions and plans of action into concrete forms of delivery, either in mobilising public goods or in responding to problems on an issue-specific basis.

Still, despite such reservations, the impact of the UN world conferences should not be minimised. In their overall focus, they have sketched an extension of what Inis Claude had earlier termed “a kind of international New Dealism, an adaptation of the welfare state philosophy to the realm of world affairs” (Claude, 1984: 66). More specifically, each of the major conferences at the core of this book targeted a particular cluster of issues at the heart of the agenda of global welfarism (on this theme, see particularly Ryan, 2000). These conferences, in sequence, were: the June 1992 Rio de Janeiro UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or Earth Summit; the June 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights; the September 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD); the March 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) or Social Summit; the September 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace; and in August and September 2001, the Durban World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (for an official review of these conferences, see UN Briefing Papers, 1997).

Nor can these conferences be taken exclusively as one-off, self-contained, and discrete events. An enormous amount of thematic continuity may be traced throughout the entire series. As underscored by the chapter structure of this book, a number of key, more focused tests ran through the life of these conferences.

A good deal of learning and cross-fertilisation also took place on both procedural and substantive levels. Patterns of institutional procedure built up in one conference seeped into the others. So did patterns of trust (and suspicion) between the various actors. The spillover of ideas and issues became marked features of the negotiations. Principles and concepts entertained during one conference cut deeply through others. Issue linkage extended throughout the process, at times on an ad hoc basis and other times in a more systemic manner.

World conferences on the front lines of “new” diplomacy

This more comprehensive understanding of governance gives solid justification for diplomacy to be brought into the centre of the analysis. To be

sure, any such privileging exercise may be highly contested. The role of diplomacy and diplomats, no less than the institution and machinery of the UN, has been at the receiving end of charges of perceived failure of diplomacy. In realist terms, this failure stems from the abdication of diplomats to discard their prime responsibility – the promotion of the national interest (for a clear exposition of this view, see Berridge, 1995; James, 1993). Immersed in the culture and the socialisation process of the UN system and the attractions of the world conferences, diplomats have lost their way. Being part of the process has become a substitute for keeping their eyes on what they are there for in the first place. Through the world society lens, on the other hand, diplomacy (as defined by the activities of professional representatives of the state) is not only of decreasing relevance but may indeed be detrimental in that it restricts and holds back other modes of communication and negotiation sanctioned by the Westphalian international system. This sense of, and distaste for, an inherent deficiency in orthodox diplomacy is captured most vividly in attacks on intergovernmental diplomacy as being “unauthentic” (Constantinou, 1996: 4).

There are signs, however, that this polarisation is dissolving with the emergence of a “new” diplomacy. Rather than being confirmed in rigid either/or terms as part of the problem, diplomacy is increasingly being seen as having at least the potential to be the means of working to a creative (if still incomplete) architecture in international affairs. The most enthusiastic supporters of the world conferences not surprisingly see this mode of diplomacy as integral with respect to this goal. When Kofi Annan refers to a “new diplomacy”, for example, he perceives it as providing a vehicle and a route for movement in the direction of global governance (Annan, 1998).³

What is more striking are signs of a trend towards accommodation among critics of traditional diplomacy from the world society (albeit not the realist) viewpoint. These critics acknowledge that even the limited availability of a bottom-up form of diplomacy has meant that “such conferences can have meaningful outcomes” (Schechter, 2001: 221).

In reviewing what is new about the new diplomacy, one has to be careful to avoid an ahistorical analysis. New diplomacy, to Harold Nicolson and others of his generation, meant “open” as opposed to “closed” or secretive diplomacy (Nicolson, 1939). In the late 1960s “new” diplomacy meant diplomacy that emphasised multilateral relations (Review Committee on Overseas Representation 1968–69, 1969). Many of the features at the heart of contemporary diplomacy reflect these same attributes.⁴ Yet, this continuity should not overshadow the enormous amount of change generated in the post–Cold War decade. States (and especially the traditionally dominant states) may well remain the lead

agents in working towards negotiated agreements through forums such as the UN conferences. Diplomatic openness, however, is no longer simply a question of allowing a wider audience to watch the proceedings. Other states than the United States and the other permanent members of the Security Council within the UN have carved out space for themselves within the international system. The logic of an activist and fully engaged wave of societal forces (in an array of manifestations) must be taken into account as well.

Through one lens, then, an extended analysis of new diplomacy is contingent on assessing the reconfiguration of “actorness”. From one angle this lens reveals a hyper-extension of the influence of the United States even at the expense of the other agenda-setting large powers, not to mention the middle powers, smaller countries, and non-governmental networks. The values of the post–Cold War decade, and the structure of power and wealth within the international economy, have been largely defined by the United States – the one remaining superpower or hegemon. The pull of these cumulative forces of integration binds all other world actors to an imposing (but often unreliable) Gulliver.

From another angle, however, the ties are not to but around Gulliver. Instead of conceding all the advantages that the giant claims by virtue of its great strength, the emergence of a new diplomacy allows a greater balance of authority to take shape, a balance that is further reinforced by the multilateral bias in equilibrating activity. Whereas bilateral and/or summit diplomacy by its very nature allows a tilt toward a closed ambit for diplomacy, multilateralism is far more porous, giving greater accessibility to actors, who in addition to status possess imagination, agility, and persistence (on the larger theme of agility in diplomacy, see Strange, 1992: 10). States with the determination and skill to grind away at the process and the ability to provide touches of creativity can (to use the oft-cited cliché) punch above their weight. The determining factor is not so much the structural asymmetry between the state actors but the talents they apply. Considerable room is similarly available for non-state groups that are ready and able to raise their game to take advantage of the opportunities (see, for example, Higgott, Underhill and Bieler, 1999).

Showcasing Canada as a representative and unique case

Canada provides both a representative and unique case that can serve to illustrate the connection between the UN world conferences, the promotion of global governance, and the rise of new diplomacy. In many ways Canada may be regarded as the quintessential beneficiary of global change in the post–Cold War decade. The opportunity lay open for

Canada to reap dividends from its long-standing championing of the United Nations and of multilateralism. In accordance with accepted discourse, these features were part of the Canadian psychology or DNA (Keating, 2002: 1–16). Any extension of the institutional fabric to accommodate the realities of the post–Cold War world seemed, therefore, to play right into Canada’s diplomatic strengths. Canada also appeared to possess the mode of operation – and toolkit of skills – most appropriate to take advantage of the breaking of the log-jam that had been imposed by the dictates of bipolarity (on this theme, see Cooper, 1997a). Coalition building on an issue-specific basis was Canada’s forte. Persuasion rather than power continued to be its tactic of choice – and necessity.

The areas in which space opened up were areas where Canada’s ingrained traits and practices in international affairs could be useful. Among the accepted notions underpinning the international system that went through a re-evaluation was the primacy of an older conception of security. As long as the global agenda was divided up on a hierarchical basis between “high” and “low” issues, the constraints on non-hegemonic – but not inconsequential – actors overwhelmed the attendant opportunities. The flattening of the issue arena had a contrary effect. This was especially true for Canada, whose international personality had long been detached from the application of a military profile or culture to foreign relations. In style, the image (or, more accurately, the self-image) of Canada was one in which the role of a demander was subordinated to that of a negotiator. Canada did not present itself as a challenger to the United States or other leading states in the international system. What it sought and expected was a role of responsibility that would affect the way the system worked in practice.

Given its material and psychological limitations, Canada had been increasingly ill-suited to make this sort of difference on security maintenance. The pursuit of global governance and some aspects of welfare creation held far more promise. Canada’s abundant (if arguably, contracting) bureaucratic resources enhance its effectiveness to perform such a role. Not only do they allow Canada to be present at the multiple sites of international negotiation, such as the UN world conferences, but they make it possible for Canadian representatives to play a comfortable insider role, blending routine activity with attention to particular issues. Factoring in the societal component, the activity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in particular, to this global governance/welfare agenda makes it even clearer how quickly Canadian diplomacy – for all its limitations – has adjusted to system-change. Medium-sized powers such as Canada tend to focus only on issues that offer a solid rationale for their participation. Compared to the need to maintain security, an explicit link between the global governance/welfare agenda and the

national interest is difficult to ascertain. The rationale for diplomatic engagement in these areas is therefore to be found in Canada's double identity – or dual personality – as a good international citizen and a status-seeker.

Just as crucially, international diplomacy has become thoroughly immersed in domestic politics and policy making. As Gil Winham has pointed out, the newly technical nature of the agenda – and the process of bureaucratisation, in particular – has contributed to this evolution (Winham, 1993), as have societal forces, by their nature and through their demands. These added elements of complexity have strained the application of Canadian diplomacy. On one side of the ledger, they add vitality (and credibility) to Canada's reputation as a cosmopolitan good international citizen while increasing the channels for diplomatic interaction. On the other side, they contribute to the managerial problems associated with fragmentation and possible overstretch. They also raise the political, policy, and image stakes attendant on Canada's performance in the international arena.

A strong image of Canadian diplomacy extending back to the post-World War era has been that of a go-between or helpful fixer, mediating either on an inter- or intra-bloc basis. Another has been that of a loyal (albeit not totally subservient) follower. The imperative has traditionally been to support, manage, and reproduce the rules of the game within the international system (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993: 22–32). One need here was to rein the United States in when it became either too isolationist or too zealous in its unilateralism. Another was to try to bring in (or socialise) the traditional outsiders in the international system, whether in terms of the East/West or the North/South dimension. A final priority for Canada was to maintain its position and level of representation in the upper echelons of the international system. The repertoire in all three components was similar: a quick and responsive form of diplomacy, a reliance on the selective mobilisation of like-minded groupings, avoidance of being isolated and cut out of the loop, and an emphasis on problem-solving. While opening up windows of opportunity for the diplomatically astute, the 1990s revealed a number of unforeseen challenges and vulnerabilities along a wide spectrum.

Previewing the specific set of tests

Having rehearsed the centrality of the nexus between the ends of global governance and the means of diplomacy, it is necessary to locate this dynamic in a series of specific tests that serve as the backbone for this book. The first test relates to the degree of departure found in the UN confer-

ences profiled throughout. The notion of UN conferences as an expression of global organisation took hold in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War and accentuated globalisation. But the conferences highlighted in this work represent a transition not a complete break with past practices. The recognition that international problems concern everybody and could only be dealt with on a global basis had appeared much earlier and needs to be appreciated when teasing out the tests of diplomacy. The second test questions whether or not the different worlds between state and societal forces have been merged through the operation of the UN conferences. Bringing NGOs into such a partnership lies at the heart of any definition of global governance. Built into any authentic partnership, however, is not just a sustained form of dialogue but tangible delivery thus raising the bar of this test. The third test hangs on the issue of leadership. At one level this test personalises the state, in that it puts an enormous onus on elected politicians at the apex of government to showcase themselves through events such as UN conferences. Yet, as illustrated in the case of Canada, this test is a complex one. Any impetus towards advancing the agenda of global governance is constrained by domestic limitations both in terms of fragmentation of decision making and a struggle for resources. The fourth test brings to the fore the contestation between very different organising guidelines for the international system. The perspective that individual UN conferences embody a new type of post-Cold War multilateral settlement or global accord (with a compensatory component in terms of distribution and regulation) (Deacon, Hulse and Stubbs, 1997: 87) is countered by the view that these events lie under the “disciplinary” cloak intended to deflect and offset the momentum towards a neo-liberal market order. Instead of being sites of emancipation these conferences become arenas simply for introducing a different recipe “to institutionalise the supremacy of prevailing elements” (Gill, 1997: 6–7). The fifth test cuts into the overarching debate about sovereignty. When sovereignty is constructed as autonomy, room for cooperative problem solving both inside and outside the national space is opened up. When the concept of sovereignty as territory is paramount, though, a harder shell forms. Even in a country such as Canada, often assumed to be post-modern in its orientation, state officials adopt a tough posture in defending its prerogatives as the final authority within a given territory. The sixth test, concerning the putative clash of civilisations at the UN conferences, relates both to an architecture of global governance that transcends cultural boundaries in principle and a diplomatic repertoire that allows mediation to take place on the ground. The rigid definition of “us and them” offered by Samuel Huntington (Huntington, 1996) is juxtaposed with scenarios that purport that there is a willingness to think and act outside the “civilisational” box in order to

deal with “issues of common concern” and search for “common ground” (Evans, 1997). The seventh and final test hinges on the question of ownership within the UN conferences. The role of women and women’s rights illuminates such a test. If the claims concerning the fundamental alteration of the rules of the game of the structure of governance – and the ability of diplomacy to act as a conduit rather than an obstacle in the pursuit of that goal – contain any validity both the room for participation by women and the boundaries of women-centred agenda must be re-ordered in a decisive fashion.

All of these tests reinforce the potential of diplomacy to act as what has been termed a “boundary-spanner” on the front lines of global governance (Hocking, 2000).⁵ One side of diplomacy remains rooted in the traditional fabric of the Westphalian world. Another side has moved towards innovation in both style and substance. Control through a narrow state-centric model vies with a more diffuse and transparent structure on a global scale. The international arena becomes thoroughly penetrated and integrated by the domestic context and constituencies. Rigid hierarchy gives way to a variegated pluralism in the global agenda, in which a variety of issues struggle for institutional attention and priority in terms of problem-solving techniques.

Navigating these tests requires two interrelated approaches. On a case-by-case basis, the need is for a combined inside/outside examination of diplomatic machinery and techniques vis-à-vis the UN world conferences. Through this narrative process the creative tensions between the traditional mode of statecraft and the pressures from an emergent society-craft will be detailed. How are these two types of diplomacy shaped and re-shaped? What are the stages (and impact) of the entanglement between them? Do they meet and access their formerly divergent worlds in a comprehensive or narrowly constructed fashion? Or alternatively do they, despite the notion of some set division of labour, persist as parallel and separate entities?

Conceptually the need is for a focus that recognises the value of diplomats – in all of their guises and their various forms of behaviour – but situates this role as an integral part of the larger system of interaction within the global system. The renewed interest in diplomacy emerges not because of its special condition, but rather because diplomacy acts both as a prism and a refractor for what is happening in both the larger policy environment and the international landscape. Whatever the debate about its exact meaning, and the degree to which diplomacy is actually new, selective questions about diplomacy act as both a vector and filter for a number of the bigger questions about global governance. More than anything else it is this function that redefines diplomacy and makes it matter.

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Tests of Global Governance: Canadian Diplomacy and United Nations World Conferences

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This book provides a detailed examination of the interface between diplomatic method and new forms of global governance located at the world conferences sponsored by the United Nations. Cast as a series of tests highlighting key concepts and issues central to the operation of international relations, this work demonstrates that global governance has become a multi-layered process within which states and non-state actors alike play vital, if often conflicting roles.

The role of Canada and Canadians in UN World Conferences is explored as a unique and representative sample of how state-craft and new forms of society-craft have taken shape over the past decade. The picture that emerges suggests a deepening network of institutions, actors, and organizations that are animating the complex regimes that govern the major arenas of world politics. The analysis supports the view that a deep residue of multilateralism still exists in a country such as Canada but argues that this tradition faces on-going challenges from a variety of sources.

“Cooper makes a compelling case for his own version of a new diplomacy, one that involves many different actors in non-traditional settings such as UN conferences. Although Cooper is unsparing in his analysis of the limits of these new trends, he also gives us reason to hope that the new diplomacy can be a bridge between a territorially defined, state-centred Westphalian world and the varied, plural, multi-layered world of global governance.”

Anne-Marie Slaughter, Dean, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

“This is an important book for anyone interested in international public policy. It gives a very clear picture of the workings of the ‘actually-existing’ legislative process of global governance (problem-specific, global conferences) and the central, perhaps essential, role of ‘middle powers’ and Canada in particular.”

Craig N. Murphy, M. Margaret Ball Professor of International Relations, Wellesley College, USA

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